

NEW CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE CDG PROGRAM

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“Congratulations and welcome to the FY01 Competitive Development Group!” Those were the first words I heard at the Competitive Development Group (CDG) Orientation just over 1 year ago as I began this prestigious program. Time flies when you’re having fun, doing so many new things, and learning so much.

I’ve been asked on several occasions what prompted me to apply. Having worked in the contracting field for nearly 18 years, I started catching myself repeatedly saying that although the program and contractor names changed, the problems were the same. During the last several years, the traveling Army roadshows were laying the foundation for a paradigm shift in acquisition, encouraging the pursuit of new and innovative acquisition approaches that leveraged commercial industrial practices from both the technical and business perspectives to get products into the field quicker and more economically. A computer on every desk changed the way we worked. Long-standing policies and procedures were being replaced at lightning speed by new guidelines that encouraged independent thinking and risk taking, and novel solutions were fast replacing the old ways. The time was now ripe, and I aspired to rekindle an

old flame of applying my commercial industry practices to government work; the only question was how to start. When the first Army Acquisition Corps CDG Program announcement came out in 1996, I saw a new opportunity to try different things, to reinvent and re-energize myself, just as the Army was starting its transformation, and so I applied.

My disappointment in not being selected was soon lost in work and I took solace that nearly 750 others suffered the same fate. That first CDG was indeed stellar; as of today nearly 76 percent of that class has been promoted into leadership positions, and it continues to leave its marks on the acquisition community.

I continued to take the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA)-mandated 80 hours of training to maintain currency in the contracting and acquisition fields, but DAWIA and something inside of me wanted more. The train of acquisition reform was now racing by and I needed to do all I could to grab the caboose and hang on for dear life or be left stranded on the tracks, knapsack on my back, being a “hobo” until retirement. So grab on I did and I applied a second time for the CDG Program. Anyone who has applied recognizes the onerous application

process, but don’t let a little paperwork hold you back. The application process is being simplified, and the program is more user-friendly than ever before.

What was the difference between my first application and my second? In the 4 years between applications, I accepted new contracting assignments with difficult problems. Eventually, some very challenging work with short suspenses and high visibility came my way and I successfully executed them. While office management was “powering down” and “empowering” employees, natural working groups, integrated product and process teams, focus groups, and quality circles started to emerge, with topics often outside the contracting arena. I volunteered for and actively participated in many of these groups as they tackled issues such as personnel evaluation revamping and job descriptions, office environments, acquisition streamlining initiatives, base closures, and major command restructuring. Still desiring to maintain a balance between work and play, I continued my more pleasurable volunteer work with the Civilian Welfare Fund, organizing health fairs, travel programs both in the United States and abroad, and working with our Post Restaurant Committee. I captured all of this on my CDG application. The next big step was to understand the selection process.

Fortunately, the Acquisition Career Management Office (ACMO) offered group and individual review sessions on the CDG application process. I took advantage of these opportunities. The ACMO reviewed my Acquisition Career Record Brief and Individual Development Plan (IDP) and offered career counseling and constructive criticism on presentation style. The CDG application process is similar to the military’s Officer Evaluation Report process. If you have the opportunity, talk to some of your military co-workers to see how their Senior Rater Potential Evaluations are written and how they are evaluated for promotion. You’ll get lots of good pointers on what is

and isn't important and, at the same time, gain more insight on the CDG process. Also talk to other CDG members; they are always ready to share their own experiences and offer some good advice.

"Does the program really meet your goals and expectations?" is another frequently asked question. The CDG Program helped me to define and focus on my goals and then provided the work environments and opportunities to achieve them. I now know what track my locomotive is on, where my transfer stations are, and which station is my final destination. I'm no longer hanging off the caboose; I'm on a career path that puts me in charge of this train.

My developmental rotational assignments were designed to meet my specific goals. I'm fortunate to work at Picatinny Arsenal, NJ, home to the Army Armament Research, Development and Engineering Center (ARDEC) base operations; the Program Executive Office for Ground Combat and Support Systems (PEO, GCSS); Army Tank-automotive and Armaments Command tenet activities; PEO, GCSS and ARDEC program management offices; and many project offices. These offices offer the full spectrum of acquisition and life-cycle experiences. For those concerned about mobility agreements, look for installations with a broad spectrum of offices and develop your IDP around the variety of office locations. You'll thereby gain the experiences while minimizing the chance of family disruption caused by physical relocation. Consider too the advantages of the IDP and the mobility agreement. The CDG Program offers the opportunity to have the government fund moves and training, and to work in locations you've been longing to visit, thought you might want to transfer to, or even considered for eventual retirement. There's lots of work to be done out there, and you may be just the one who can do it!

I'm learning acquisition from the end to the beginning; no, I don't mean beginning to end. I started government service working as an Industrial Specialist for the Defense Logistics Agency in the Defense Contract Administration Services Management Area, Springfield, NJ. I traveled throughout northern New Jersey visiting contractor facilities to ensure that the products they were manufacturing for our servicemen and servicewomen would be delivered on time, in the right quantities, and within the stated price.

Transferring into the contracting arena, I became a Contract Administrator in the same office handling post-award contract issues such as equitable adjustments, delivery schedule revisions, and Defense priority and allocation system issues. When I transferred to Picatinny Arsenal as a Contract Specialist and then Contracting Officer, I wrote the contracts that I previously administered. But pieces of my acquisition puzzle were still missing: requirements generation, funding, logistics, and organizational management. My current developmental rotational assignments were tailored to fill in these missing pieces. I completed my first rotation working with PEO,GCSS in the program management office with assignments dealing with horizontal technology integration, transition policy for ammunition, the industrial base, and recapitalization.

Now in my second rotation, I'm learning the multidisciplinary skills, political sensitivities, international diplomacy, and jack-of-all-trade responsibilities of the Deputy for the Joint Program Manager for the LW155mm Howitzer. One of my newly acquired skills is as publicist, preparing and disseminating the newsletter and daily and weekly reports. I'll shortly rotate into a new assignment within this office, concentrating on my alternate career program in logistics. Once I've completed the CDG Program, I'll have worked in almost all aspects of the acquisition process and will have a

better appreciation for the difficulties each organization encounters along the way to a fielded system.

What are my suggestions for those of you considering the CDG Program as a way to enhance your acquisition career? Seek out new activities and continuously improve yourself. Even new languages and belly dancing can help you gain a better understanding of yourself and stimulate new ideas that can be applied to other daily activities! Embrace the computer environment, and become skillful in a variety of software programs (a challenge still facing me). Take on tasks you've never done before; you may find them enjoyable and they may lead you in different and unexpected directions.

I decided long ago never to be afraid of trying something new or setting my sights on more lofty goals. As I was told by a local travel guide in Maui, HI, when traveling along the famed Road to Hana, "Most people miss the boat," he said. "It's not arriving in Hana that's exciting; it's the journey on the road itself that's the thrill." So too is the CDG Program; graduation is not the ultimate destination but the new experiences and the journey of discovery that is the thrill. This program is molding the future leaders and managers for the transformed Army and you can be a part of it!

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